

Excusing the female dancer: Tradition and transgression in Bollywood dancing

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Item songs are big-budget dance sequences in Bollywood and arresting examples of how bodies of dancing women in Bollywood, with fusion of traditional and contemporary dance genres construct new sites of sexual desire and identity in India. While these spaces of articulation are not immune to the circulation of female bodies in a globalized Indian economy these dancers do have the opportunity to convey a different kind of femininity than what has been allowed in Indian popular culture. Milder censorship, the MTV-revolution, the political-economy of making dance videos, the granting of industry-status to Bollywood and the exponential growth of the cosmetics industry are all fundamental to the changes. This article is a mapping of Bollywood dancers with an eye to Indian myths about dancing women, *apsaras* and *devadasis*, and an analysis of trends that allow rupture and re-articulation of dances and the ideologies they produce. The article employs a combination of dance and film studies analysis.

The Bollywood film *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005) is a classic film plot where two con artists start in competition and end up in love. They pair up in a series of humorous and unlikely scenarios to hoax and hassle the general public, with policeman Dashrath Singh (Amitabh Bachchan) close on their heels in hot pursuit, though secretly sympathetic. In best Bollywood tradition Bunty (Abhishek Bachchan) and Babli (Rani Mukherjee) traipse through this ramshackle romp with catchy song-and-dance numbers to public if not critical approval. The item song in this film's very catchy and popular soundtrack, *Kajra Re*, is an arresting example of how bodies (abetted by cinematic techniques) of dancing women in Bollywood, with their fusion of traditional and contemporary dance techniques, and classic Bollywood film and dance genres (have the potential to) construct new sites of sexual desire and female identity in India. While these spaces of articulation of female sexuality are not immune to the circulation of female bodies in a globalized¹ Indian economy, and are in fact deeply implicated in this latter motive, at the same time women in these dance numbers have the opportunity to convey a kind of femininity that is new to Indian popular culture. Partially responsible are several factors: the easing off of the censors with a view to making Bollywood films more accessible worldwide,² the music television-revolution that started early in the 1990s, the political-economy of making music videos in India,³ the granting of industry-status to Bollywood⁴ and the revamping of the cosmetics industry⁵ are all linked to the changes.

This article has a three-fold goal. First, it studies how bodies of dancing women in item songs produce stories and ideologies, and how they render, re-produce, or rupture Indian

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myths about femininity. Recent trends in item dances produce a space for the articulation of female sexuality that seems less confined by traditional nationalist ideals. Alternatively, to go further, perhaps these bodies produce nationalist ideals of femininity that were hitherto denied as 'Indian.'

Second, it explores the key role of dance and body movements rather than just the narrative or script in producing – and not merely reflecting – ideologies of femininity and stories of the nation.

Third, it investigates the role of dance space as a space that provokes fascination and anxiety, in that as a 'fantasy' space it is often denied 'realness,' and yet it is a space with potential for production of emerging cultural and gender ideals.

Item songs are big-budget song-and-dance numbers that are played on television countdowns – some popular songs run for several months at a time, and work as snappy advertisements for a film and original music score⁶ with their quick cuts and sexy imagery. These songs light up the charms of the female dancer,⁷ sparking postcolonial nostalgia for apparently glamorous and untamed femininity and an un-tethered nation. Item songs are not a new trend in Bollywood. Big song-and-dance numbers performed usually by the female lead or supporting role have existed since the start of Bollywood with films like *Aar Paar* ('On My Side and Yours', 1954) with item song *Babuji Dheere Chalna* ('Slow Down, Sir'), *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960) with item song *Jab Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya* ('There's no place for fear in love'), and *Pakeezah* (1971) with *Chalte Chalte Yoon Hi Koi Mil Gaya Tha* ('Just walking one day, I met the one'). An analysis of traditional Bollywood genres of dancing women and of the myths that predate them, however, reveals the prevalent (non)location of the female dancer as an absence or negation in the popular Indian imaginary. This negation is a denial of female sexual desire and desirability by the nationalist project, and simultaneously a denial of male sexual arousal that was seen in Gandhi's era as a threat to the work of the nation.⁸

Dancers in India seem to arouse a curious confusion in the minds of the audience – or perhaps filmmakers, choreographers and censors. Not an ambivalence because that would suggest an indifference, but maybe an anxiety, a collision of fascination on the one hand and fear on the other. The only way to come to terms with the apparently over-generous charms of the female dancer is to deny her realness, her motives, or her very existence. Key Indian myths and discourses of dancing women as well as genres of dancing women in Bollywood like the courtesan, the vamp and the working girl reveal and highlight this panic.

Sita, Menaka and the forlorn *devadasi*

Indian myths and discourse do not write of dancing women as especially 'bad' or 'wrong,' but rather undomesticated, either because of their 'nature' or through force of circumstance. A dancing woman is associated with sexual, erotic and spiritual aptitude that goes hand in hand with her dance talent and haunting beauty. This beauty and dancing skill align her with sex rather than love, body rather than emotion, frivolousness and wilfulness rather than duty or obedience, creating tearing dichotomies that divide 'independent dancing woman' from 'motherly, domesticated woman,' the latter whose morals are more closely aligned with the national project,⁹ the former whose intentions are hard to judge or control.¹⁰ As stories go, the Menaka myth is a seductive example of the latter.

In this story from the Indian mythological epic, the *Mahabharata*, sage Vishwamitra is meditating in the forest in his quest to achieve the status of saint or *maharishi* when the

Gods (especially Indra, who feels threatened by Vishwamitra's growing powers) send Menaka, an *apsara*,¹¹ to test and break his will. Menaka is an accomplished dancer, a temptress, who lures Vishwamitra away from his *tapasaya*, seducing him with her dancing, teasing and beguiling with her charms.¹² The Gods of wind blow away her garments to reveal her intoxicating body as she dances, and Vishwamitra is consumed with passion for this vision. Upon the birth of their child, Vishwamitra rejects both mother and baby as symptoms of his lapse.

The Menaka myth makes men beware of women with an overpowering sexuality. Like Aphrodite, whose mythic sexual attraction lives on into current lore, but whose spiritual and creative energies get less attention, a woman/dancer with such overwhelming sexual fascination as Menaka can lead men into unchartered territory. In Indian mythology Menaka could be an alter ego to Sita, the wife of Rama, who follows him through years of exile from his kingdom, only to be abducted by a rival king. Rama eventually retrieves her after a long and bloody war, which is the key story in the *Ramayana*, and restores her to her rightful place by his side after many years in captivity. She then comes under suspicion for adultery, and asks Mother Earth to accept her into her bosom as a trial of her purity and innocence. Sita, who pays a lifelong penalty for taking a step outside the patriarchal boundary, the *Laxman-Rekha*,¹³ is in Indian mythology and spirituality the idealized wife, who takes her husband's word as the word of God, obeys his wish, and understands his judgment and integrity as supreme.

In pictures, cinematographic and televisual representations¹⁴ the difference in character between Menaka the 'other woman,' and Sita the wife, is implied by the essential difference in their bodies and body movements. While paintings of Sita that date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and sculptures from the eleventh and twelfth centuries reveal a young, nubile, erotic woman in filmy garments,¹⁵ trends in the twentieth century especially highlighted in the 1990s speak to a more chaste depiction of femininity. A bowed head and downcast eyes mark Sita's obedience and chastity, while Menaka holds her head high. When Sita makes eye contact it is usually to impart womanly wisdom, often as an assertion of respect and obedience for her husband's wishes and command. Her eyes are soft and soulful. Menaka's eyes are fiery and playful; they invite, incite, and penetrate the male heart, challenging him to rise to her desire. Sita is bare of all accessories, besides her wifely *sindhoor* – the vermilion in her hair, a sign of her married status, while Menaka wears jewellery on her head, to frame her seductive face, on her hands to display their agility, her midriff to show off the swing in her fertile and inviting hips, on her feet to give accent to her dancing.¹⁶ Menaka's negation is in her very existence, she is an *apsara* who is a teasing and temporary embodiment of unrequited passion. While she is safe from the confines of domesticity, she is denied emotion or autonomy as a woman. The nationalist movement during the anti-colonial struggle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries¹⁷ and the heightening of Hindu nationalist sentiment in the 1990s¹⁸ are crucial in the design of these trends in gender signification.

Mira Nair brought to the screen a filmic version of another popular Indian folk story in her film *Kama Sutra: The Tale of Love* (1996) that demarcates clear lines between the wife and the courtesan. The film is a self-orientalizing picture of ancient India, where the kings are decadent, lazy, puerile and fickle, the wives mistreated, the dancers worshipped for their skill in erotic love. In this story Tara and Maya, the princess and her servant, grow up together in Tara's palace, Maya wearing Tara's cast off clothing, and sharing Tara's lessons and games, setting up a relationship based on resentment and jealousy. While Tara

marries the king from the neighbouring state, it is the temptress Maya who seduces him on his wedding night and captivates his imagination. Tara, the upper class wife, dresses in heavy saris that hide her body, keeps her eyes lowered, and prepares mistresses for her royal husband. She is not as accomplished as Maya in either dance or the erotic arts, and is frigid in bed. Maya's body in contrast is like a graceful snake, she floats, her hips swinging; her bust thrust out and proud, her midriff long and bare displaying a flat stomach, an inviting navel, accenting the curve of her body between breast and hip, her back in a permanent arch. Tara's heavy sari covers her head and body and acts as the shroud of her domesticity, so that her anonymous body is a marker of her (husband's) family rather than of her own personality or femininity.

The sari is heavily laden with cultural meanings [in Bollywood] of nostalgia, tradition, womanhood, nationalism and social status, the full range of which are developed in the Hindi movie. Mothers or mother-figures always wear traditional, sober saris. In older movies that contrasted the heroine with the vamp, the heroine almost invariably wore a sari as an emblem of her chastity and goodness. In recent years the unmarried heroine, who is usually a teenager, wears Western clothes before marriage but changes into a *salwar-kameez*, but more often the sari, after marriage. (Dwyer and Patel 87)

The entire course of the film rests on Maya's abundant sexuality and her dancing skills. This fatal sexuality leads to acts of grim manipulation and violence, in the end leaving her violated, betrayed and alone.

The *devadasi* or royal dancer's body is another popular site of contestation¹⁹ and is linked mythically to her *apsara* archetype, from whom she is said to be descended. Academics love to talk about her, bring her out of the jangle of dancer's bells as a ghost of all Indian dancers, oppressed, misunderstood, reformed . . . Her story recalls that in the nineteenth century she was an independent servitor (a telling contradiction) of the temple, and gave freely of her talents to the royal court, and any noble patrons who were inclined to support her. In this way she also supported the temple, numerous artisans and musicians, and her own children. Colonial and nationalist discourse colluded in the middle nineteenth to early twentieth centuries to debase her and reduce her to the lot of a prostitute (whose story is less well documented), and lead her to disease, poverty and general misery. Social reformists then re-awakened her art in order to save her from the nationalist anti-nautch movement and in the first half of the twentieth century brought her to the concert stage to make her 'respectable.' As academics woke up to the damage caused by obliging social reformers who collaborated (in a spirit of apparent rebellion) with colonial power, the *devadasi's* story became a convenient emblem of a spiritual-erotic pre-colonial nation that was apparently lost because of colonialism.

This story of independent art and nobility dented by politics and then re-shaped and re-vitalized by revolutionaries seems pat. In fact, her story is so mythical that it negates any individuality, freedom or choice, or on the other hand represses stories of oppression or mistreatment she might have faced in her interesting history. It glorifies 'her' (an emblem, not an individual) as a dancer, reminding us that in Indian religion sex and spirituality are connected, but denies her/them any authenticity or desire as real women. I am struck by the impossibility of referring to her story without colluding in her erasure.

In similar ways this glorifying/negation of dancers exists in popular culture, especially in Bollywood, which is film and music industry rolled into one for a large majority of Indians, and a map of cultural change and ideologies. This denial not only negates dancing women, but in fact denies female sexuality, independence from domesticating patriarchy, and female agency and autonomy. What follows are examples/genres of dancing women

in Bollywood, their bodies and bodily attributes outlining their character for the audience who shares in the production of meaning.

Rekha – the Courtesan, in *Umrao Jaan* (1981)

In the song that introduces the courtesan Rekha to the brothel assembly and to the film-viewing audience *Dil Cheez Kya Hai Aap Meri Jaan Lee Jiye . . .* ('It is not just my heart, but my life that belongs to you'), she is dressed in bridal red, with a tight-fitting bodice, and a flowing skirt and trousers, her quick feet, her graceful turns and delicate hand gestures inspired by the North Indian dance form *Kathak*, which is a rich mix of Hindu and Mughal traditions. Kathak technique is often used in courtesan and *tawaif* signification and *mujra* dance. In a classic pose, Rekha (*Umrao Jaan*) sits facing the audience, one leg crossed and the other slightly extending out. She sings, *Iss Anjuman Mein Aapko Aana Hai Barbar, Deewaron Dar Ko Gaur Se Pehchan Lee Jiye* ('Make yourselves familiar with the walls, since you will be coming here often'). She points with her inviting wave-like fingers and her eyes to her extended foot with her ankle-bells or *ghungroo*. She stands gracefully, walks backward, profile to audience, beckoning with her hands and eyes, breasts heaving gently to show surrender and invitation.

Rekha is a much admired leading lady,²⁰ fascinating not only in her dusky good looks and accomplishments in dance and acting, but also her own turbulent love life. She is the ultimate Menaka, deadly in her effect on men. The underlying theme of courtesan films in Bollywood is one of sadness and loss. The courtesan is hauntingly accomplished in dance and achingly beautiful, and this seems to keep her from any chance of happiness. Rekha, bejewelled and graceful, dances with self-restraint and expresses the poignant grief of the courtesan. Her body and gestures clearly articulate that she is needed by society and yet shunned by it. She lives in veiled corners of dark city streets, admired by men, hated by wives, mistreated by pimps, willing to sacrifice all for a love that will always remain unrequited.

The courtesan has been a popular figure in film, where her attractions give rise to a variety of pleasures in the audience. She is portrayed as a victim of men's lust and as an object of the viewer's pity, but also delights the audience in being the object of the male gaze as she dances for his entertainment. The combination of a beautiful actress and the opportunity for incorporating poetry, music and dance into the narrative are important, but viewers also enjoy the spectacle of the body, together with the elaborate scenery and clothing, tied to a certain nostalgia arising from the decline and disappearance of courtesan culture. (Dwyer and Patel 69)

Chakravarty (273) analyses how courtesans in Bollywood are always placed on society's fringes, vulnerable in a male-dominated world, but are configured as women with big hearts, creating nostalgia for a lost, pre-colonial stately India. Courtesans are interestingly often deployed in Bollywood to represent the highest of feminine virtue – sacrificing her passions for the man's and for safeguarding and upholding the norms of civil society. Rather than transgress on societal rules and civilized customs, the courtesan gives up her own desires, sacrifices her 'rights' with her lover, for the superior rights of his wife, his work, his social responsibilities toward family and state. Virdi (132) discusses courtesan subjectivity in Bollywood and analyses how some courtesans find redemption if rescued by domesticity and romantic love.

Helen – vamp par excellence, in *Teesri Manzil* (1966)

Helen was a household name in 1960s and 70s in India, and audiences admired her as a consummate dancer. Her most favoured characters were those of the vamp, the rustic belle, or the 'friend'.²¹ Her role in the 1966 film *Teesri Manzil* is a good representation

of the various roles that she played in her career, as well as of the notion of ‘vamp’ in Bollywood. In this film, Helen is a nightclub dancer, deliciously mercurial and temperamental, secretly in love with the hero Shammi Kapoor, who in turn loves the leading lady Asha Parekh. Her life is emblematic of all Bollywood vamps – full to the brim with dance, drink, unrequited love, turbulent emotionality and a final redemptive hurrah when she saves the life of the man she loves and loses her own.

In the famous song, *O Haseena Zulfon Wali* . . . (‘Oh beautiful woman, with glorious hair’) Helen is dancing in a hotel restaurant to entertain the dinner guests, with Shammi Kapoor as the male singer and dancer. This nightclub space is used in Bollywood to create an interesting feminine interlude and provide a not-true-to-life space for dance for the entertainer, and dramatic, unsaid emotions in the hotel guests.

The space created [in dance club scenes from the fifties to the seventies] is ‘unreal’, in that there are no such clubs in Bombay, but it is an idealization of trends seen in music videos and Western musicals such as *Saturday Night Fever* . . . In films of the 1970s the setting often has a dance floor with tables and chairs, to which the dancer will come to sing a song full of meaning understood by the cinema audience . . . The dance floor will show a few bewildered Westerners trying to look as though this is the kind of place in which they feel comfortable. It is a space in which all of society’s norms are transgressed: women wear sexy clothes, drink and dance for men’s entertainment. The sequence allows the viewer to enjoy forbidden pleasures that are subsequently often disavowed by the film’s narratives. (Dwyer and Patel 68)

In *Teesri Manzil*, while Asha Parekh (Sunita) in best 1960s style wears tights, t-shirts and big hair, and twists like the best of them there are differences in her body and Helen’s that set them apart in character and inform us which of the two has the more ‘legitimate’ life and passions. In best Bollywood fashion their characters, as well as Shammi Kapoor’s (Rocky), are archetypes.²²

In this song, Helen²³ climbs down from a distant staircase jerking her hips wildly side to side to the music, and swinging her arms up and down over her head and to her sides. While Sunita’s eyes are heavily kohled, Helen’s eyes are caked with heavy, light-coloured eye shadow. The effect for the former, along with close camera shots of the face, is to highlight the interiority through the eyes. Sunita can show her anger, passion, grief all through her eyes and frown, while Helen’s face is a mask adorned for her guests at the hotel. The camera takes only long and medium shots of her dancing body, and ignores the expression in her eyes, which is masked in her role as entertainer and vamp, and therefore, inconsequential.

In *O Haseena* . . . she dances all around the restaurant, flits through veils, props, screens, and other accessories, enhancing her persona as shifting and unsteady, unlike Sunita’s, unpredictable, hiding behind pomp and masquerade. Sunita, however, displays her heart on her shirt-sleeve. She is apparently too dignified and too *real* to be a dancer by profession, while Helen, though redeemed by her love for Rocky, is a woman ruined by her hearty appetite for sexual pleasure, drink and dance – all ‘vices’ that apparently go together. Therefore, while she is admired as a gorgeous dancer, Helen is always denied the role of the leading lady, her independence of body and spirit and her ‘lack of modesty’ in dress and movements keep a ‘legitimate’ interiority out of her reach in all her films.

Madhuri – one, two, three . . .

Madhuri Dixit has been a landmark dancer-leading lady for many years. She was the first to bring together successfully the goddess, dancer, worker, wife all in one body and it is in her roles that we first see a change towards acceptance of the female dancer.

Ek do teen . . . ('One, two, three . . .') in the film *Tezaab* ('Acid') released in 1988, is set on a stage, where a large working class audience cheers wildly. The film is the romance between Mohini, a working class dancer who supports her father's drinking habits and lifestyle, and Munna, a college student/petty crook. This song interrupts the narration of her father's exploitation of Mohini, allowing the audience *not* to dwell on exploitation of women and of the poor. While the song distances the audience from any reflection on real violence against women in the family, it allows Mohini a rebellious, female space where she enjoys her freedom to dance and move her body as she pleases.

Mohini seems aware of her body as an energetic dancing/labouring machine. In one sequence Mohini, hair untamed, sits on the stage and in pantomime beats her head theatrically on the ground. She gets up and runs, head thrown back, arms wide, toward the audience, and then takes two *Kathak chakkars* (turns). While her intense love for Munna, and her demand that he love her back call to mind Radha and Mira archetypes from Krishna myths, her moments of Indian classical dance in an otherwise folk – *banjara* (a dance form from Rajasthan), *dandiya*, *duffali* and cobra – dance choreography could signify her cultured, goddess-like qualities.

One of the keys to Dixit's initial success was her combination of middle-class, girl-next-door persona and a sensuality, expressed through her dances, which in the past had been relegated to the vamp . . . After the success of *Hum Apke Hain Kaun!*, Dixit was catapulted to mage-stardom and was regarded as the foremost female star by the media and became the highest-paid actress in the film industry. (Ganti 138)

An earlier example of a working-girl/dancer was in the film *Mera Saaya* (1966) where Saira Banu performs the role of the dancer and wife in a double role. This is a good comparison and contrast for Madhuri in *Tezaab* because the dancing in the former is almost exactly the same folk-style choreography as the latter, but the signification of the dancer follows a more traditional trend. Geeta and Nisha are identical twins, the first a dutiful wife, the second a dancing-girl in a gang of robbers. The film allows Nisha to display dancing prowess, with associations of illicit sex and the travails of the lower classes connected with stories of loss, death and corruption. Geeta is the upright, sari-clad, domesticated wife. Madhuri brings these stereotypical dichotomies to the same body in dances that are almost legend in Bollywood lore. While earlier films needed either two women, or the same actress in a double role, to explore this wife-dancer dichotomy, newer heroines increasingly bring these roles to the same body.

Tezaab was hugely popular with lower-middle and working class audiences. Bollywood, used to walking the tight rope between its middle class audience and its rural poor, attempting to be sensitive to both, has always been aware that although the middle class audience, simply because of the nature of variegated cinema halls, would buy the more expensive tickets in the 'upper stall' or 'balcony,' the 'mass' audiences, rural and urban poor as well as the lower middle classes, have in the past made up a larger percentage of the population, and their money could by no means be sneered at. In the early years of the 1990s, soon after the national 'economic liberalization' budget presented in 1991 by Manmohan Singh (the then Finance Minister, now Prime Minister), that overturned the Congress Party's cautious closed-door policies designed by Nehru in the 1950s, the first response from Bollywood to the cable-television invasion in 1992, was to shift its attention almost entirely to the 'mass' audience. *Tezaab* is a precursor to this trend, an indication of the shift to a working class audience, but allowing ideologies of femininity to emerge that challenged existing dichotomies. Madhuri articulated a very 'Indian' femininity, one that could at once negotiate with the influence of cable television and global advertising, and unpick the dichotomies set up between wives, goddesses, dancers and workers.

Dance space in Bollywood perhaps is constructed as outside, as independent (perhaps threatening) to the male nationalist project, which, as I have shown, has its drawbacks in that it reiterates and demarcates gender stereotypes. However, it may also have its advantages. The dancer's body always already remains an outsider. Dance space remains removed from 'real' life using several tactics. It is heightened in its theatricality and emotionality. It is understood as risqué, as stepping beyond what is acceptable in 'real' life. The dancer and dance space are removed from the State project that is male in its nature. The elements of nostalgia and adventure in dance remove it even further. This removal²⁴ can function, at times, as an escape rather than a confinement because this outside space allows for experimentation and a challenge to 'real life' state ideologies. Since dance space is believed to be unreal but desired, it is possible to play with issues of sexual freedom by displaying more than what is allowed in the narrative, by donning alleged masks of 'performance' that in fact reveal very real desires, lifestyles and aspirations.

Aishwarya – item girl in *Kajra Re* (2005)

Aishwarya is item girl incarnate in the song *Kajra Re* in the film *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005). Aishwarya, former Miss World, a heartthrob of many in India, set to make waves in Hollywood and global advertising, appears in this item song and has no other role in the film. This trend of big actresses appearing in one item song is recent, taking off only in the last five or so years. It has been customary to have either a supporting lady like Helen as the item girl, or the leading lady herself, but in 'special' circumstances. The song *Kajra Re*, remarking at her kohl-lined eyes, is noteworthy in that it combines many genres of Bollywood dance, and so has the potential to rupture some existing dichotomies about femininity. Though it is set in a bar, the dancing and style of dress evoke street dancing, as well as the dance moves of a courtesan. The setting of a nightclub is more that of a vamp. While genre lines have remained quite delineated over the last several decades from Madhubala's nightclub singing in the 1950s, Meena Kumari's courtesan role in *Pakeezah* in 1971, and Zeenat Aman's disco dancing in the 1980s, in recent trends in Bollywood the item song crosses genre lines in dancing, and the main theme seems to be to draw crowds rather than to maintain genre-integrity. The dance seems to fit tangentially the filmic narrative or in a traditional Bollywood genre as long as it is beautifully set, danced, and displayed. In that sense, even though it is set within a Bollywood film as is most popular music in India, it is constructed more like a music video. Character attributes that were strongly delineated in older films (for example, good and bad woman dichotomies) are now increasingly blurred. The bodies, body movements and character attributes of dancing women and 'wives' have moved closer to each other; the distinctions are less severe, allowing a kind of freedom for women to choose lifestyles and bodies that are less strictly policed by ideas of good and evil.

Aishwarya wears a tiny *choli* (blouse), and a flowing skirt down to her knees. Her dress is more evocative of a street or village dancer than that of a courtesan in that she shows skin and her legs are bare. While her clothes signify lower class status and a gypsy life, traditionally coming with allusions of a free sexuality, unbounded by middle class norms of behaviour, she seems more a dancer rather than a prostitute by profession (similar to Rekha's item number in *Parineeta*, 2005). The camera in *Kajra Re* has picked up music-television-style moves in that it zeroes in on body parts, unlike older dance numbers that stay with whole or half body shots and shots of the face. The camera lingers up and down the body. Her hair, make-up, style of dress, eye contact, a subtle expressivity in the face

rather than the heightened expressivity or *abhinaya* of the traditional Indian female dancer, all mark her place in a more global media setting. While she becomes an export to the diaspora, a floating capitalist signifier, she is at the same time allowed a freer sexuality.

Alternatively, perhaps, the body, despite its confines on this commercial stage, produces inferences of a sexuality that is female *and* strong, willing and assertive. Mulvey's iconic gaze theory posits a female body and sexuality that is passive in its articulation and its desire to satisfy the active male gaze. It is from the viewpoint of male (both male film protagonist and audience member) longings and desire that women in the cinema are characterized and portrayed. I would like to suggest the possibility that Aishwarya's dance number, because of its focus on female desire, attempts to play with this uni-directional gaze presented by Mulvey. The woman turns into the person that looks, seeks and chooses, while the male character awaits her pleasure.

While Rekha in *Umrao Jaan* is clear in her willingness to satisfy male longings, Ash (as she is popularly referred to by the Indian media) is more interested in quenching her own. In this song her eyes are assertive rather than compliant, but not aggressive or manipulative, another recent trend in Bollywood women, allowing female sexuality and desire to separate from automatic allusions of exploitation. A dancer's eyes are particularly important in Indian dancing. While the courtesan's eyes were traditionally poignant, the vamp's desperate or manipulative, the wife's a transparent mirror of her true heart; new genres of dancing women have eyes that can be honest, direct and alluring all at the same time.

Ash extends a lamp toward Amitabh Bachchan in invitation, looking at him, looking down at the lamp, biting her lower lip, looking up at him with one eyebrow raised in a question. The camera focuses on her bare back, with just the one string of her *choli* holding things together, as her hips sway side to side, the flesh on her back supple and young.

I would argue that in *Kajra Re* and a few rare examples of recent item songs, the subject is the woman and not the man *despite* the fact that she is performing for men. The focus in this dance sequence is on female desire. The camera focuses on her autonomy of choice and gives the prerogative of approach to her. She is free to choose the older or the younger man, or no man at all. While Aishwarya in this song might be an epitome of male dreams, it is her dreams and desires that seem the focus of the action, and the spectator's attention. Even though she is a product for popular consumption, I would argue that she also symbolizes a break from chastity and suppression of desire as desirable Indian female attributes. Interestingly, the song makes no distinction between emotional and sexual desire. There are no heaving glances or sighs that suggest that she is dancing against her will, or that her sexual and monetary passions might be satisfied but her heart will remain untouched. There are no shrewd glances, or any that are cold or devoid of warmth.

Traditionally 'item girls' seem to teeter on a strange tightrope. On the one hand, respected, admired and loved by audiences or at least treated with a mixture of awe and trepidation²⁵ in their dancing; in filmic narratives on the other hand they have to justify their subjectivity and lifestyle. While many audiences go to the cinema to admire the dance numbers, the narrative makes the dancer palatable, framing her in the guise of 'vamp,' 'courtesan,' or placing her in the narrative as a rupture of the filmic plot. Women who dance on the Bollywood screen today seem to bring together in their bodies elements of the dancer, vamp, and courtesan, and less and less of the Bollywood 'wife.' While in post-colonial India bodily dissimilarities have been an important marker of the difference between Indian and Western women, the recent trends in consumption of cosmetics, clothes, trends, lifestyles, media, beauty and visual culture have implied that Indian women (in and out of Bollywood) adopt more global ideals of beauty. These global ideals of beauty come with associations of individuality and independence that one could argue

are precious and rare commodities for Indian women attempting to assert their sexuality outside of domestic and conjugal parameters. It does need to be noted here that these trends are more visible in upper and middle class women, and more so in urban centres than in rural areas and smaller cities. The trend toward a possibly freer female bodily signification is thus implicated in global trade and tourism. Item numbers are specifically linked with music television and a trend in youth-oriented music videos, which are further intimately connected with the increase in access to global fashion trends, collaboration with hip-hop artists, and a general rise in middle class and young-adult salaries because of the increased presence of multi-nationals.

In dance numbers, I argue, there is sexual agency in the blurring of previously dichotomized boundaries and genres. ‘Wife’ characters (good women) in current day Bollywood can simply be girlfriends, can dance, wear revealing clothing, be assertive and independent and can tend toward Menaka archetypes in their bodies, movements and clothing. Sita archetypes, in dress and deportment, and even in narrative and textual elements, are becoming less and less visible in Bollywood as global youth culture in collusion with capitalist consumption is becoming the audience of choice. This is not to say that ‘wife’ characters do not exist, or that stereotypes of wives and wifely attributes are at an end. However, ‘wife’ roles have greater freedom than before. In the film *Bunty aur Babli*, the female protagonist played by Rani Mukherjee is in fact a ‘wife’ once she marries Bunty, but she too is allowed agency in dress, dance and independent choice. Deciding in favour of continuing her life as a con artist, instead of settling down to a quiet domesticity, she dons a tight black leather strapless jumpsuit, with its tiny pair of shorts, a black pair of boots and a variety of other sexy costumes, to dance in a fast paced disco-hip-hop-style number. The song *Nach Baliye*, asking everyone to dance, is choreographed on a multi-level set, the fast-paced, wildly panning and zooming editing, choreography and *bhangra*-hip-hop music highlighting youth, energy, and youthful sexuality, traditionally characteristics absent from wife repertoires.

Item numbers are a focus in this essay because the trends in bodily signification that speak to more freedom in sexual choice for women occur first in dance numbers, while the narrative is slower to catch up. The growing rise in youth culture, along with its focus on youthful bodies and dance, global fashion and accessories, as well as consumer products link dance numbers with circulation of Indian popular culture not only within India, but also in Asian countries and South Asian diasporas, and can further be seen in Western music videos, global advertising, real life weddings, clubs, parties, and just walking down the street. These trends are produced by bodies that actively interact with global capitalism, international trade, and media trends, instead of bodies that passively take in and spit out global discourses.

Notes

1. Lechner and Boli (1), in the introduction to their reader on globalization, explain its essential ‘raw material’. They include expanding post-World War II global infrastructure for travel, commerce, communication, as well as increased migration, satellite broadcasts and Internet communication. They explain, ‘Increasing international trade and investment bring more countries into the global capitalist system; democracy gains strength as a global model for organizing nation-states; numerous international organizations take on new responsibilities in addressing issues of common concern.’ For India, which officially became an ‘open-door’ economy in 1991, the increase in international trade, expansion, and privatisation of industries – especially media and telecommunications – as well as ease of travel and communication between the diasporas are of especial interest in this paper.
2. Deshpande (‘Consumable Hero’) in her web article analyses the revenues from Bollywood, and reports that current day successful films can expect to earn almost twice as much revenue from

the distribution of a film abroad (with an estimated audience of about twenty million) than in a territory like Bombay. In addition, more than local audience sales (which now only account for about thirty-five per cent of total revenue), music rights for a film generate huge revenues, as well as advertising rights within the film.

3. In an interview I conducted with Ken Ghosh on 17 July 2005, at his office in Andheri, Mumbai, he describes that 'skin videos' are popular with music video directors because they require low budget sets, but generate large returns. He says, '... the almost sure fire success is the skin. Show skin, five babes in the rain, seems to work. More than audio CDs music companies sell VCDs because I think we have a big market. A lot of men are willing to buy VCDs, so that they can watch in the privacy of their own homes women cavorting in the rain, so that helps sales a lot. [And] it's cheaper to shoot a skin video than it is to shoot a *Made in India* type video.' He is a successful thirty-nine-year old music video director, who has been directing music videos for twenty years. He is the director one of the earliest and most popular music videos in India, called *Made in India*. Released in the early 1990s this video had a very elaborate *swayamvar* sequence. For further information look at Juluri (41) who talks about Ken Ghosh's success, as well as this particular video (63, 96, 99, 101).
4. According to Ganti (51–57), in 1998 filmmaking was finally granted the status of an industry in India, in an attempt to rescue it from the underworld. She also analyses the structure of the industry, its functioning, and the production and distribution of films.
5. Refer to Munshi, 'A Perfect 10'. She describes the explosion of the make-up and toiletries industries in India at the same time as a rapid spate of young Indian women gained the Miss Universe and Miss World titles year after year in the early nineties.
6. According to Juluri (39) these 'mega' songs offer a spectacular viewing experience. There are typically a large number of dancers, extravagant and very high-budget sets, which act the main pull for the audience, with a narrative that is assembled often as an afterthought. According to Juluri this trend began in the 1980s when the size of theatre audiences became smaller because of 'video piracy' and the underworld continued to finance films and raise the level of investment. Refer to Mundy for an analysis of what he calls the 'MTV aesthetic.' He describes (224) how this aesthetic pervades many cultural products, including film, television and advertising. He analyses the relationship between MTV and the appeal of the spectacular and its construction in Hollywood cinema.
7. There is a recent trend of male dancers showing off their dancing skills in item numbers. While senior actors like Amitabh Bachchan and Shammi Kapoor used to dance in scenes set on stage, newer actors like John Abraham, Hrithik Roshan (who might be responsible for popularising this trend in *Kaho Na Pyar Hai*, 2000), and Abhishek Bachchan circulate as sexualized commodities in quite the same fashion as the female stars. While the former were present in the dance numbers as characters, the latter present themselves as bodies.
8. A post colonial ideal of Indian masculinity drawn by Gandhi, perhaps in retaliation to the English picture of Indian men as lazy, lustful and ineffectual, recommends celibacy and self-control as the spiritual road to vitality and citizenship. Alter (*Gandhi's Body*) analyses this construction of Indian masculinity in detail, describing the history of the nationalist movement at the turn of the century in colonial India. Indian men in the cinema especially after the wedding vows have been uttered often turn into staid citizens, whose responsibility toward the family and duty toward the nation take precedence over sexual desire that is seen to have been tamed by marriage. This has been the picture of the Indian national citizen and therefore of India – asexual, staid, responsible.
9. Chatterjee's writings on the subject describe closely the social reform movements instituted for women at the peak of the colonial struggle in the late nineteenth century, the roles assigned to men and women in this nationalist struggle, the images of the nation established, and the discourse that prevailed then and that continues in some forms now. He says (131), '... the specific ideological form in which we know the "Indian woman" construct ... is a product of the development of a dominant middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. It served to emphasize ... the new construct of "woman" standing as a sign of "nation", namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on ... the image of woman as goddess and mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home.' The 'Indian' woman as citizen of the new nation was described as an opposite to the lower class woman, the prostitute, and the Western woman.
10. Consult Pattanaik (*The Goddess in India*) for archetypes of Indian femininity. In his chapter on nymphs (55–86) he calls dancing women in Indian mythological tales 'slippery damsels' who

are never quite within reach of the men who lust after them. They entice and seduce to test the male spirit, provide bliss and pleasure, but because of their sensual nature keep men within earthly and mortal bounds, and from achieving eternity. Stories reveal that these dancing angels are a warning to men, to beware the snares of sensual gratification and pleasure.

11. An *apsara* is an angel in the sense that she resides in the skies, in heaven, and is not a mortal creature. However, unlike the connotation of asexuality that generally goes with the word 'angel' a Hindu *apsara* is usually a beautiful woman, skilled in the arts and in erotic love.
12. For more, consult Valmiki (*The Ramayana*).
13. In the mythological epic the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Laxman are exiled to the forest for fourteen years. When Rama calls Laxman for help one day, Laxman draws a line around the door of the house, and tells Sita that she is perfectly safe as long as she stays within this boundary. Sita, to help a poor beggar, steps outside this line, and is kidnapped and held captive for many years. Feminists often invoke this *rekha* as patriarchal dictate. Stepping outside this dictate often implies a heavy penalty.
14. *Ramayana* was televised for many years in the 1980s on national television at the prime slot of Sunday morning. *Vishwamitra* was televised in the 1990s, also on a daytime Sunday slot on national TV.
15. The *Ramayana* exhibition at the British Library available for view in the summer of 2008 shows a range of artists depicting the stories of the *Ramayana* in various centuries. Mewar artist Manohar from the seventeenth century, painters from the eighteenth century in Rajasthan and Northern India suggest similar bodily signification for the women, as do Indian temple carvings from as early as the first century AD.
16. For more on body characteristics of mythologized figures, consult Jain's article on Indian masculinity in calendar art that has transformed from smooth, soft, boyish images of the Lord Rama and other male mythologized figures, to muscular, hyper-masculine images (Jain 'Muscularity and its Ramifications'). I look at bodily differences in visual representations between the two women based on my viewing of Sita in the television series *Ramayana* and Menaka in *Vishwamitra*, both of which aired in the 1990s, as well differences in pictures that can be found in popular art and websites dedicated to Indian mythology.
17. Consult Chatterjee (*Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*) for nationalist anti-colonial trends that lead the discourse of Hindu upper class wives, their various duties and bodily attributes.
18. Consult Rajagopal's (*Politics after Television*) analysis of the Rama *janambhumi* and Ayodhya controversy of the 1990s and the politicization of the *Ramayana* coincident with the telecast of various epics on national primetime television.
19. Meduri (162–82) analyses the nationalist and trans-nationalist discourses that reconstructed the body of the *devadasi* in 'modern' India. The *devadasi* was newly understood in late nineteenth century India as morally corrupt, a woman whose sexuality would have to be sacrificed in order to save her 'soul'. While her immorality was taken as an (orientalized) indication of the state of the Indian nation – corrupt, prurient, hedonistic – only her complete 'reform' into a more 'pure' and 'chaste' state of 'being' would salvage the new nation-state. Her re-signification into an artist as distinct from the whore paralleled the borders drawn around the middle-class woman of the home (distinct not only from the whore, but the Western woman and lower class woman), and allowed India to signify a disavowal of corruption and an adoption of moral uprightness, duty and delayed gratification.
20. Rekha brings into every role a mystique built on previous roles and her personal life, which has often been a subject of scandal. Dyer (132–40) provides a useful analysis of the relationship between stars and the characters they portray, suggesting that a star will bring their star quality to the role. This is to varying degrees deliberately written into the script, but even when it is not, the presence of the star is enough to evoke perceptions and images of their personality or life or history in the mind of the audience (Dyer 132–40). I would argue that the body of the star is important in this sort of placement, carrying in or creating through it, character traits, charisma, emotional content, and so on. In my analysis of dances and dance genres, I am attempting to capture this relationship between star and character. Rekha, for example, with her tumultuous life, her roles as courtesan, or other woman, is a great choice for teacher of the erotic arts of the *Kamasutra* in *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* (1996). Her erotically-charged roles are shadowed by rumours of her real life role as 'other woman' in Amitabh Bachchan's marriage with Jaya Bachchan nee Bhadhuri.
21. Wikipedia appropriately describes Helen as a 'Bollywood dancer and actress of Anglo-Burmese extraction, best known for playing vamps and vixens in Bollywood movies of the

- 1960s and 1970s. She was famous for her flamboyant dance sequences and cabaret numbers.’ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_\(dancer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_(dancer)).
22. Chakravarty, in her work on Indian cinema and its connections with political scenarios and State policy, discusses how Bollywood characters are mostly broad archetypes (200) rather than psychologized individuals. Bollywood films often use typical scenes and interactions between protagonists that are repeated in many films. These are familiar to the audience, and help construct the characters as broad archetypes. Along the same lines, Viridi suggests that Bollywood films always have at their centre (avowed or not) the ‘fictional nation’ that is fought over by archetypal forces of good and evil (32). She elaborates that characters are not well developed or very complex, and the plot lines are ridden with coincidence. Characters stand in for professions, classes, castes and kinship roles (41).
 23. Also refer to Pinto (*Helen*), for her life story. Viridi analyses the character of the vamp, with a brief look at Helen as a woman desired but not loved (168). She analyses that the vamp invites the male gaze but is condemned for eternity (169). Viridi suggests that as the scope of female sexuality became bigger in India, the figure of the vamp disappeared (170). This figure has made a comeback in item songs, but has undergone a change, in that the character may have the bodily attributes of the vamp, but still maintain her position as leading lady, not quite as prone to condemnation.
 24. Refer to Gopalan (*Cinema of Interruptions*) for an analysis of song-and-dance sequences as interruptions to the cinematic experience that actually heighten the cinephilia experienced by the audience.
 25. For more on audience and media responses to item girls, refer to the following articles; Vaidya ‘Item Bombs’; Zariwala ‘What Do the Item Girls of Bollywood Say?’.

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